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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: UNEMPLOYMENT PROTESTS SPREAD TO NEW TOWN

REF: A. TUNIS 394
[1](#)B. TUNIS 362

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Following several weeks of relative calm, demonstrations have again broken out near the Tunisian border with Algeria, this time in Feriana. There have been periodic demonstrations in the region since January, stemming from poverty, high levels of unemployment, and claims of governmental corruption. The attempts of security forces to disperse protestors left several injured. One person is reported to have committed suicide, a big ratcheting up of the level of protest in Tunisia. Poverty and unemployment are driving some of the largest and most widespread demonstrations Tunisia has seen in recent years. Despite the government's attempts to placate locals, the protests that originated in the southwestern mining town of Redeyef are spreading to other towns in the region. The Tunisian media's limited coverage of the events has been confined to reporting on the trial of 11 people arrested during the protests. End Summary.

Desperate Times

[1](#)2. (C) Residents of the southwestern mining towns of Redeyef and Um El Araies took to the streets in January, prompted by an announcement that the region's largest employer would seek the majority of its new hires from outside the region. Despite the government's attempts to calm the protestors (Ref A), demonstrations have continued. The latest protest took place on June 2 in Feriana, a town of 24,000 located near the Algerian border. According to the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), a group gathered in front of the office of the Delegate (the assistant to the governor of Kasserine), to protest unemployment, high taxes, and governmental corruption. The protest began mid-morning, and continued until well after noon. Security forces attempted to disperse the crowd using tear gas, batons, and water cannons. Several people were injured. A high school teacher, Atef Zairi, was taken to the hospital, but security forces reportedly did not allow Zairi to have an MRI and detained him for several hours. Numerous political activists and labor union leaders were reportedly arrested.

[1](#)3. (C) In the past two months, several suicidal young men were desperate enough to court death in protesting unemployment. On May 27, Chokri Selmani, 26, climbed an electrical pole in Feriana in front of a large crowd and security forces. He shouted at the crowd that the government

was responsible for the high levels of poverty in his village before jumping from the pole, killing himself on impact. According to local NGOs, on May 6, 2008 a group of unemployed youth held a sit-in at a power station in Redeyef, temporarily shutting down the station. Though most of the group dispersed when security forces arrived, three individuals refused to let go of cables until they were promised jobs, even after authorities threatened to turn the power back on. Security forces went through with their threat to restart the generator, which electrocuted the young men holding onto the cables. One died at the scene (Hichem Aleimi), another is in a coma, and the third escaped with a strong shock.

14. (C) The government's response thus far has been to announce new initiatives aimed at spurring economic development in the region (Ref A). In the short term, the GOT has deployed security forces and replaced many top government officials in the region (Ref B). Several people have been arrested in connection with the protests. On May 29, human rights groups reported that nine young men who participated in the protests appeared in court on related charges. Eight of the men came from Redeyef, and one, Kamel Derouiche, was from the town of M'dhilla. The men from Redeyef were arrested during a demonstration while they were allegedly throwing stones at security forces and threatening them with razor blades. Derouiche reportedly dowsed himself with gasoline during a demonstration and threatened to light a match. He was charged with disrupting public order. All of the accused deny the charges, and told the presiding judge that their confessions had been extracted under torture. Derouiche was given a fine; the rest were sentenced to terms in prison, ranging from a month and a half to four months, though some of them received suspended sentences. The trial was reported in several mainstream print-publications, the only domestic media coverage the protests received.

Comment

15. (C) Despite footage of the protests that has shown up on YouTube (Ref A) and widespread rumors about the events, the GOT continues to downplay the situation in Gafsa and Kasserine. Word of the riots is slowly spreading to other regions, most of which face similar challenges of poverty and unemployment. Public protests in Tunisia are rare. The use of suicide as a tactic represents an extraordinary escalation in the level of protest. Given the rising price of staple foods and gasoline it is likely that unless the government takes serious measures to promote economic development the riots in Gafsa and Kasserine will continue and may even spread to other regions. End Comment.

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